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ON THE CHARACTER OF MARXIAN THEORY, "RICARDIAN MARXISM" AND THE ROLE OF F. ENGELS

DOCUMENTATION,
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Exposition of the basic points of the Marxist theory of value and its ideological implications, of money (Parts I and II), of social capital and of crises (Parts III and IV) makes it clear that the theoretical analysis (the system of concepts and their logical implications) in question is not compatible with other currents in Political Economy. Marx's Critique of Political Economy constitutes, to our opinion, the only scientific (and, for that reason, critical) discourse of the capitalist relations of production: Starting from the forms of appearance of these relations, deciphers their causal determinants.

However, as argued mainly in Part III, Marx's theoretical system evolved neither uniformly nor without contradictions in Marx's writings:

- First of all one has to bear in mind that the major tenets of this economic theory had not been developed by Marx until the writing of the Grundrisse (1857), which means that one shall not identify all of Marx's economic writings (e.g. sections of The Poverty of Philosophy, 1847) with his theoretical system of the Critique of Political Economy.
- Most importantly, this new theoretical "domain" was explored and developed by Marx in a not straightforward way: In parts of his 1861- 65 writings, Marx flirted with or even retreated back to the value theory of Classical (Ricardian) Political Economy (as we noted in relation to the "problem of transformation" of values into production prices and in relation to the theory of ground rent – see Part III). This consists the main theoretical discontinuity in Marx's mature economic writings.¹

The above stated critique to Marx does not aim at his theory, the Critique of Political Economy, but quite the opposite: Our main argument is that Marx was mistaken as to his own theory, when he adopted (or retreated to) the theses of Political Economy, exactly because he distanced himself from his own theoretical system, the Critique of Political Economy. The question is now raised, of what may be the possible causes of Marx's ambivalences towards Classical Political Economy. Answering in a general way, one may say that the issue simply reflects the contradictions of Marx's break with Ricardian theory, contradictions which are immanent in every theoretical rupture of the kind, i.e. in every attempt to create a new theoretical discipline on the basis of the critique of an established system of thought.

In this context we shall notice that what we have identified as Marx's ambivalences towards Classical Political Economy appear in his (unpublished during his lifetime) Manuscripts 1861-65, especially in the Manuscript 1864- 65, which was edited by Engels and published as Volume 3 of Capital. In other words, they appear at a time period when Marx was re-examining and revising the work plan of his great theoretical project.

We are referring to the fact that during the course of writing his great opus, Marx altered his work plan. While in 1857-9 he planned to write six books (Capital, Landed Property, Wage Labour, The State, Foreign Trade, The World Market and Crises) later on he worked out the plan for the three books of Capital, whereby capital, wage labour and rent are dealt with simultaneously in the analysis of the capitalist production and circulation process. This change of plan is due primarily to a modification of concepts: Initially Marx reflected on the distinction between causal determinants and forms of appearance on the basis of the concept of "capital in general", as opposed to the "competition of many capitals" (whereby the latter became comprehensible as the form of appearance of the former). However, his analysis of the formation of the general rate of profit led him to an understanding of competition also as an immanent determining factor of capitalist relations. Thus, in Capital he abandoned the notion of "capital in general" and formulated the concepts of social capital (involving all causalities of the capital relation on the level of the whole economy, but having also empirical articulations, i.e. dimensions referring to empirical regularities –e.g. the "production prices") on the one hand, and individual capital on the other.² This change of plan and the modification of concepts may have temporarily influenced Marx's lines of argumentation in a way that allowed the incorporation into his writings, of positions stemming from Classical Political Economy. The further investigation on this subject exceeds, however, the scope of the present book.

In this epilogue we would like to stress the thesis, that Marxian theory is attenuated when Marxists do not comprehend Marx's ambivalences towards Political Economy, i.e. the existence of conceptual contradictions and, much more important, of a second, non-Marxist, discourse in his writings. Every "sanctifying" attitude towards Marx, presenting him, as the inculpable master who never made a single false step, practically blurs the scientific and heuristic kernel of Marx's analysis, as it identifies it with the Ricardian element, present

in some of his elaborations. This "sanctifying" approach to Marx's work is though as old as Marxism itself: It starts with Friedrich Engels, Marx's closest collaborator and also co-author of many texts, who edited the 1863-65 Manuscripts of Marx and published them as Volumes 2 and 3 of Capital. Engels was until recently considered, not to have played any significant role in the economic writings of Marx, apart from the necessary editorial work on Marx's drafts. However, the recently (1992) published original Manuscript

of Volume 3 of Capital (MEGA II, 4.2) has made clear that: Engels made significant modifications to the manuscript, despite his own claim that he had restricted his role to one of faithfully presenting Marx's work.

Changes to Marx's text include design of headings, insertion of sub-headings, and textual transpositions, omissions and insertions. The changes have real impacts on the text, especially in the area of crisis theory, the theory of credit, and the relation between capitalism and commodity production (Heinrich 1996-97: 452).

If one excluded the insertions made by Engels, the German version of the 3rd Volume would be "shrunk" to 580 from 860 pages! (Hecker 1998) Some probably less important, but in any case substantive changes of Marx's text were made by Engels also in the Manuscript of Volume 2 of Capital (Arthur 1998: 124-5).

It would be though not correct to consider that Engels misquoted Marx's notions or his development of arguments. From a detailed comparison of the original Manuscript of Volume 3 of Capital on the one hand and of the well known text of Volume 3 as edited by Engels on the other, we may conclude that nearly all textual interventions (text additions, transpositions, omissions, completion of phrases or arguments etc.) aimed at a unification of Marx's discourse, and at giving Marx's draft the shape of a complete work: the third Volume of Capital, "which concludes the theoretical part" of Marx's work (Engels, in Marx 1991: 91).³ However, by doing so, Engels not only identified the Ricardian element in Marx's writings with the actual Marxian theoretical system of the Critique of Political Economy, but also highlighted this element and thus gave it the status of Marx's theoretical novelty per se: To name the most important example, he presented Marx's "transformation of values into process of production" as the ultimate solution to the problem that has been known as the dead end of Classical Political Economy.⁴ Furthermore, Engels treated Marx's work as the complete unflinching opus of Marxian theory.⁵ This sanctifying stance towards Marx's writings was later to be adopted by the leaders of both the 2nd International (Kautsky etc.) and by Soviet Marxists, especially after Stalin's rise to power.

We believe that the way Engels (and later on most political and theoretical leaders of the socialist and communist movement) treated the theoretical writings of Marx was mainly politically motivated. As Marxism is closely related with the labour movement and the strategy of socialist transformation of capitalist societies, Engels and the other Marxist leaders seem to have believed that they needed to show in every direction that their political course derives from a more or less complete, fully fledged and totally cohesive scientific theory, and that Marx's texts contain this theory.⁶

To make this point clear, we must insist: Marxism is constructed not simply as a theoretical system, but also as an ideology of the masses, as an ideology which determines the political action of organisations and movements of the working classes. As Gérard

Bensussan correctly noted:

Marxism cannot be deduced only to Marxist theory, even if it is the theory of Marx himself. 'It meets' the masses, it intertwines with a history, it participates in social practices: It is then, simultaneously, also an ideology (perhaps more than one). Its crises are crises of this problematic condition (Bensussan 1985: 267).

However, Marxism-as-an-ideology-of-the-masses is not Marxist theory itself. It is certain of the conclusions of Marxist theory, which can function as "battle positions" and principles of political strategy for the worker, and wider people's movement: The class-exploitative character of capitalism, the unity of production-distribution and the detachment of surplus value from the worker to the benefit of capital, the innate conflicting of capital-labour, the concealed class character of the state and of its formally neutral –civil equality– apparatuses, the overturning of this capitalist political power as the precondition of socialism, etc., are conclusions of Marxist theory which in several historical circumstances comprised the basis of Marxism-as-an-ideology-of-the-masses (mass Marxism). We speak about a practical ideology⁷ of the workers' movement.

Certain of its elements also existed in pre-Marxist critiques of capitalism, while within the daily political and syndicalist struggle, the working class almost spontaneously may approach certain positions of this Marxist ideology (usually in their reformist version), independently of any knowledge of Marxist writings.

In contrast, theoretical analyses like the ones discussed in this book, for example, those that are contained in the writings of Marx in relation to the value form and money, or the expanded reproduction of the social capital, or prices of production and the equalisation of the general profitrate, etc., comprise the component elements of Marxist theory, which as a rule, precisely due to their theoretical character, are not contained in what we have named Marxism-as-an-ideology-of-the-masses. They are part of Marxism-as-a-theoretical-system.

Here we should note that Marxism-as-a-theoretical-system does not constitute "academic Marxism", in the sense of a theoretical system detached from the political and social class struggle. On the contrary Marxism-as-an-ideology- of-the-masses can only then escape from dogmatism and reformism, when it is fuelled and enriched by Marxism-as-a-theoretical-system. In fact, in this case, Marxism-as-a-theoretical-system can extract objects of analysis (as well as conclusions) which are connected directly to the conjuncture of class

struggle.⁸ This is the way that we comprehend the relation of "internality" between Marxist theory and the labour movement⁹ (see also Milios 1995).

The position of the dual substance of Marxism (theoretical system – ideology of the masses) is especially significant in order to comprehend what may have forced Engels (and a whole tradition of Marxists after him) to repel any argument or indication that even Marx's works may not be free of contradictions: The picture of an infallible Marx, laying down by means of "scientific socialism" the victorious future of the working classes, may have been regarded as a useful "weapon" in the process of shaping a socialist political strategy inspired by Marxism. It seems also that Engels, at least from the time on of his permanent habitation in London (September 1870), had devoted himself to this task of proving the labour movement and the left political leaders of the time with those Marxist arguments, which could help reshaping the socialist strategy.¹⁰

It may be true that strengthening of Marxism-as-a-mass-ideology constitutes a major precondition even for the development of Marxism-as-a- theoretical-system: Marxism having to struggle against the dominant bourgeois ideology, the systematisation of which and its promulgation, is supported in the suffocating supremacy of the ideological state apparatuses (education, family, media, church, etc.), has only one advantage: Its capacity to intertwine with the condition of the struggle of the working classes; in other words, its ability to penetrate the working class, its ability to be reproduced as an ideology of the masses (see also Althusser 1977).

However, if the arguments formulated in the present book are correct, a sanctifying stance towards Marx's writings, which leaves uncriticised the Ricardian elements that have slipped into Marx's analyses (what we have described as Marx's ambivalence towards Classical Political Economy), obscures the scientific substance of Marx's Critique of Political Economy. It thus fetches up a "Ricardian Marxism", which means nothing less than the displacement of Marxist theory by alien to it theoretical discourses (Classical Political Economy or other forms of bourgeoisie theoretical discourse).¹¹ In this case, Marxism is weakened not only as a theoretical system in its confrontation with theoretical constructs deriving from the Keynesian or the Neoclassical theory but also as an ideology of the labouring classes, as it cannot vindicate its internal consistency or bring forward its ability to decipher the existing economic and social reality.

taken from:

John Milios
Dimitri Dimoulis
George Economakis

Karl Marx and the Classics
An Essay on Value, Crises and the Capitalist Mode of Production

pdf here: Milios-Marx-and-the-classics(2)

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